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ABSTRACT

This document describes a training program provided to faculty, staff, and upperclassmen group co-leaders of the Academic Orientation workshops at Ursinus College. The text describes the specific objectives and methods used to conduct these freshmen workshops. There is widespread agreement that optimal education requires students to learn through their active involvement with information, concepts, and principles. The Academic Orientation workshop was specifically designed to communicate the college's expectations of high student involvement in classes from the outset of the freshman's college experience in order to promote active learning on campus. The text explains how co-leaders are trained, looking at background (a couple of meetings at which faculty members discussed ways to orient new students to the academic side of the school); overview of academic orientation workshop format; objectives of academic orientation workshops (student expression and student listening); process considerations for workshop leaders; discussion segment; and conclusion of co-leader training. Freshmen attendance at the workshop was very good, in part due to the strenuous efforts of the Student Life department to present the Academic Orientation workshops as an integral part of the overall new student orientation program. Contains 4 references. (SM)

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Promoting Active Learning in Freshmen:

The Ursinus College Academic Orientation Workshop

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1989

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I

INTRODUCTION

There is widespread agreement that optimal education requires students to learn through their active involvement with information, concepts and principles (Ausubel, 1963; Bruner, 1966; Joyce and Weil, 1980; and Strike, 1975). While virtually all college educators strongly believe that students should be actively involved in the learning process, most instructors find that the classroom reality falls short of their expectations. Faculty often complain that too few of the students participate in discussions, ask questions following lectures, or appear "engaged" during class. Professors and administrators agree that students would benefit more from their courses if they abandoned their passive role and transformed their education into a more shared, participatory endeavor. Modifying the classroom behavior of college students is an ambitious undertaking, but is obviously central to the task of improving education. Achieving these changes requires multifaceted interventions. At Ursinus College, where for years we've attempted to foster active learning through varied techniques, we recently decided to implement a new Academic Orientation workshop for freshmen. This workshop was specifically designed to communicate the college's expectations of high student involvement in classes from the outset of the freshman's college experience, in order to promote active learning on campus. The following is the text from the training program provided to faculty, staff, and upperclassmen group co-leaders of the Academic Orientation workshops. It describes the specific objectives and methods used to conduct these freshmen workshops.

II

METHOD
TRAINING FOR CO-LEADERS

We're here to get ready for tomorrow afternoon's study skill workshops for freshmen and transfer students. I'm glad that you've agreed to serve as group co-leaders, because I think these workshops might help some freshmen get off to a better start next Monday.

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So, what are we trying to do here? Well, in a sense those of us that teach are trying to address our worst nightmares. . .namely, visions of inert, sometimes sleeping bodies in our classrooms,

1. that don't respond to questions and don't ask questions,
2. that don't seem to care a bit about what's going on in class and don't listen well,

3. and that maintain that their learning is 100% our responsibility and that it's entirely our fault if they fail to learn.

It's no fun to teach with too many of these "non-students" in class. . . they can set a tone that drags down everyone else. So, we're going to try an experiment designed to nudge these newcomers a bit in the right direction.

BACKGROUND

These workshops grew out of a couple of meetings among faculty members that took place last spring, discussing ways of orienting new students to the academic side of Ursinus. After assembling a long and grandiose list of all the messages we wanted to impart, and envisioning all the resistance we imagined we'd encounter, and ever mindful of how busy everyone is at this time of year. . . we decided to suggest a modest one-shot communal workshop experience, targeting what's most (sometimes painfully) obvious to those of us that teach--student behavior in the classroom. We decided that by getting to these new students first, we might convert some of them into believers in a more active, independent approach to learning. We want them to think a bit about how learning takes place. . . and to understand our expectations of them as college students.

So, this year's workshop focus will be on how students operate in the classroom and how they can best prepare for active participation in class. We want to help these new students to get the most out of their classes here--and we want them to enliven (or at least not deaden) our classes by coming, caring, and communicating! Faculty members, this is your big chance to let students know what you'd like from them in your classes!

OVERVIEW OF ACADEMIC ORIENTATION WORKSHOP FORMAT

Tomorrow's workshops will last for 1 1/2 hours each. Initially, groups of about 50 will meet to view a 10 minute videotape, produced and directed by one of our students, Craig DiLouie. The tape, which we'll see a little later on this morning, depicts five of our finest "in action" in the classroom and sharing some of their ideas about how students can best learn.

This tape was designed to introduce incoming students to some of the expectations of college professors and to stimulate their thinking about how college classes might be different from those they had in high school.

The tape emphasizes the importance of active involvement, in terms of both class participation and effective listening skills, and intends to challenge the belief that the student role in the classroom is a passive one. The tape also conveys the notion that students are responsible for their own learning experiences.

After viewing the tape, an emcee will divide each of the large groups into three smaller sub-groups of about fifteen freshmen or transfer students. Each small discussion group will be assigned a room and two student co-leaders and one faculty or staff co-leader (that's you guys).

After getting acquainted via some brief introductions, each small group will discuss the videotape and what it means to be an "active learner".

While the videotape will serve as a common point of departure, as co-leaders you should feel free to allow discussion to grow beyond the specifics of the tape--and to touch on any aspect of study skills, the learning process, or the college experience in general.

The videotape is intended to be an initial stimulus for discussion, but each sub-group will shape its own experience.

OBJECTIVES OF ACADEMIC ORIENTATION WORKSHOPS

1. The primary object of these discussion groups is to provide an experiential introduction to the concept of active learning in the classroom--in other words, during the meeting, we want the new students to talk, listen, and think! Many of them will be scared--intimidated. . . we want to help.

Student Expression

Our efforts as co-leaders should be aimed at doing all we can to help these freshmen be successful in taking the risk to express themselves in some way. . . to let them know we value assertiveness and curiosity. Encourage them to ask questions and to express at least one opinion.

We want to try to break the norm of silence, so bend over backwards to reward students for talking! We want to empower freshmen to express themselves, to think and analyze, to draw on their own personal experiences. . . to

trust themselves and their minds! We want to show them from the start that we value what they have to say--so listen attentively.

Student Listening

When we're doing the talking in the classroom, in order to engage our students, we need their help! We want them to really "be there" while in our classes. . . to be active, accessible listeners as well as active speakers.

In larger classes, this is obviously of central importance. And we need more than just "talkers" for communication to occur even in our seminar classes. We try to encourage reflective types who might listen more than they speak--but whose eventual comments often prove especially illuminating.

So in tomorrow's workshops, we want to try to convey the value of both types of active participation--thoughtful listening and speaking. One way of achieving this is for the co-leaders to listen actively themselves and show interest in what the new students have to say.

Another is to discuss the listening process and how various factors can prevent effective listening. You might want to talk about how communication is a two-way street--and how bad listeners can impair a speaker's performance, while good attentive listners can facilitate a speaker and enhance everyone's experience. Faculty and co-leaders might want to disclose how hard it is to give a good lecture when the audience looks apathetic or asleep.

2. The second objective is to encourage students to assume greater responsibility for their learning. In order to do this we need to debunk the myth that professors have all the answers and that it's their job to fill the student's mind with information.

We also need to expose these newcomers to some good examples of independent thinking students, who are confident and eager to share their ideas. We want to show them that at Ursinus, they'll be expected to lead as well as follow. In order to do this, we'd like the student co-leaders to run the show.

Faculty and staff co-leaders will serve as helpers--they can share their perspectives, expectations, ideology. . . help to clarify points through reflection. . .confer "legitimacy" on the proceedings. . . perhaps ask students "what do you think my job as a teacher is?". . .but primarily faculty and staff should be there to support the students and listen respectfully. (Fellow faculty members: This may be your hardest assignment all year--Don't lecture! You're there to make the students look good!)

The student co-leaders will serve as role models--living, breathing, talented active learners. . . but let me caution you, don't be too perfect and dazzling, because it might be hard for freshmen to identify with you!

Feel free to take over. . . use the blackboard to outline discussion points to help your group organize its thoughts. . . try to draw out quiet students by asking what they think. We want to counter the wrongheaded notion that speaking up in class discussions represents (excuse the expression) "brown-nosing".

We want these new students' first taste of college to be one that encourages them to think and act on their own--and to expose them to some peer pressure to be involved.

Students, you don't have to prepare a formal speech on how you've gone about becoming a success at Ursinus, but before tomorrow afternoon we would like you to reflect upon what's worked for you and what hasn't. Example: How have you learned to manage your time? How do you let off steam? How do you maintain interest in your courses? Please share your experiences and recall your own anxieties, if you're willing. Are there any anecdotes that might help new students make better choices about how to approach their studies? If so, consider including them tomorrow.

PROCESS CONSIDERATIONS FOR WORKSHOP LEADERS:

In conducting these meetings, you'll probably want to maintain a fairly informal, nonthreatening tone.

Be patient--allow things to unfold and remember that silence is okay--Don't rush to fill all pauses. . . instead, see if a new student might pick up the ball if you remain quiet.

Stay flexible and responsive to your particular group's needs. You needn't feel pressured to cover any specific content. This should allow you to share control with the incoming students. . . let them know that they will help shape the afternoon's discussion.

If your group wraps up its discussion a little early, that's okay.

DISCUSSION SEGMENT

Now break into subgroups of two students and one faculty/staff member. Students, please stand while each faculty/staff member sits. See who knows whom; it's best if students can link up with a faculty/staff member they already know in some way. . . but if you aren't familiar with one another yet, that's okay because today's meeting

will hopefully allow you to become somewhat acquainted.

(Create threesomes. Hand out sheets, room assignments).

Student co-leaders will serve as tour guides. You will escort your group to the library for a tour, to study skills workshop, and to the group meeting in Bomberger per schedule sheets.

You'll also initiate introductions once subgroup discussions begin. Why don't all the threesomes take a moment to decide on your game plan regarding how you'll handle introductions--whether each of you will introduce yourself and then go around to all the new students or whether one of the three of you wants to introduce all of the co-leaders.

(SHOW FILM:)

Now this is going to be a very loosely structured thing--hopefully the students will have comments--positive or negative--about the videotape and what it conveyed--and conversation will naturally evolve in your small groups. However, in case things drag, it might be a good idea to come up with three or four "discussion starters"--for example, questions about what it takes to make it academically at Ursinus or your own reactions to the videotape or experiences from your early college days that might get freshmen to review their own plans and expectations.

For the next ten or fifteen minutes, I'd like each group of three co-leaders to come up with a few ideas about how you might help a slow-moving discussion take flight. If we have time, we'd like you to report back to the whole group what you see as your best idea--perhaps it might help others out.

CONCLUSION OF CO-LEADER TRAINING

These workshops are only part of what we'll be trying to do to improve new student's study skills. As part of their orientation packet, all new students will be receiving an in-house, self-explanatory booklet Annette compiled entitled Tips for Freshmen which addresses other facets of being an effective student, including good study skills; how to work with an advisor, studying in groups, suggestions about reading texts, note taking, test taking tips, and time management techniques.

The Learning Resource Room in Studio Cottage is also equipped to help students interested in honing their study skills through various books and self-instructional packages.

Good luck tomorrow!

III

RESULTS

Freshmen attendance in the workshop was very good, in part due to strenuous efforts on the part of the Student Life department to present the Academic Orientation workshops as an integral part of the overall New Student Orientation program. Verbal participation within some of the fifteen workshop groups was limited at first, but increased after co-leaders used sample questions to help focus the meeting and frame student thinking about classroom behavior. Although the video tape spurred some discussion, most freshmen shared only general positive reactions to the tape. However, when a small, random sample (n=25) of freshmen were approached two weeks following the workshop, they reported remembering the videotape (100%) and said that they felt it was useful (84%) and did influence their ideas about how their college classes would operate prior to their first class meetings (88%). Although the rate of class participation has not changed strikingly following use of these Academic Orientation workshops, there does appear to be a modest increase in students' willingness to comment during class. Interestingly, an unexpected benefit of the program has been seen in the upperclass workshop co-leaders, whose own class participation has increased following their involvement.

IV

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